

The Poughkeepsie Journal
Friday, October 18, 2002

Group gauging PCBs' strain on region

Meetings invite public input

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Poughkeepsie Journal

The mid-Hudson Valley could benefit from new government studies of natural resources damaged by PCB pollution.

In a process parallel to the federal cleanup of PCBs north of Albany, the Natural Resource Trustees are charged with identifying damaged natural resources throughout the Hudson River, assessing their value, and proposing restoration projects to compensate the public for the damage.

Projects could take many forms, from building a waterfront dock to creating a new wetland.

"Because it affects the whole river, we would expect the restorations to take place throughout the river," said Joseph Steinbacher, an environmental toxicology and injury assessment expert with the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration's Damage Assessment Center.

The trustees, a group of federal and state scientists, economists and lawyers, held two public meetings Thursday in Poughkeepsie's City Hall to answer questions and get input on their plan.

General Electric Co., which is cooperating in the \$500 million dredging project, would also be liable for the costs of restoration projects. Those costs have not been estimated.

GE discharged over 1 million pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls into the river from manufacturing plants 40 miles north of Albany for several decades until the 1970s.

Studies take years

A variety of studies are underway or planned to assess damage to the Hudson's natural resources -- from fish, birds and mammals to water, mud and air.

The studies could take two to four years, according to Steven Jay Sanford, the state Department of Environmental Conservation representative on the Trustee Council. By law, the trustees have until three years following the federal cleanup -- which isn't scheduled for completion before 2011 -- to issue a legal claim.

GE has expressed interest in cooperating in the assessment, and a settlement could be reached at any time, even before studies are complete.

Flora Jones, who attended the meeting, said her biggest concern is those who eat contaminated fish from the Hudson near her home in Beacon. The state advises eating most species irregularly, if at all.

"They're fishing there in the morning. I warn them, but I find we don't have the same language," Jones said. "This is a people issue."

Relevant Web links

For more information about the Natural Resource Damage Assessment, visit www.darp.noaa.gov/neregion/udsonr.htm.

More stories about PCBs and the Hudson are available at www.poughkeepsiejournal.com/projects/pcb.